

Because such fingers need to knit

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Because such fingers need to knit

by [middlemarch](#)

Summary

At each step, with each each stitch, she told herself she could always stop.

She could but she wouldn't.

He was the only one who might truly understand.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

- Inspired by [Restricted Work] by [middlemarch](#)

It was the blue hour before the Grisha ate dinner at the Little Palace, two hours before the King and Queen sat down at the Grand Palace, and so Genya was in Alina's room, ostensibly helping Alina get ready but really just gossiping about the Queen's latest request and Zoya's ongoing attempts to reconcile with Botkin. Alina had considered her options and felt she had to take a chance, though gambling didn't come naturally to her. It was Genya, she reminded herself, Genya would move between the two palaces, the only Grisha who would possibly understand. And if she didn't, she was probably Alina's only real friend at the Little Palace, the only person who might answer without understanding, taking Alina on faith.

"Genya, I need some advice," Alina said.

"Will you take it?" Genya laughed. "I guess this time, you actually want to hear from me. But, of course, how can I help?"

"How could I commission a gift for the Darkling he wouldn't discover before I gave it to him?"

"Sankta Sofiya, you're asking for a lot, Alina," Genya replied. The question was shocking enough to blanch Genya's perfectly tailored complexion. "To keep a secret from the Darkling —"

"Not a secret, a surprise," Alina said.

"I'm not sure he would see it that way," Genya said.

"He will, I know he will," Alina said. She had said it so often to herself that she nearly believed it was the truth. It was not his smile that she relied on, but the serious expression in his dark eyes, when he knew she was looking at him and when he didn't. "Anyway, I'm the Sun Summoner, I have more...latitude with him than the other Grisha, don't you think?"

"I think you're talking like a cartographer again," Genya said. "I think you should tell me what you have in mind."

"I can't do that," Alina said.

"Why not?"

"Because if you don't know, then if you're asked anything, you won't have to lie," Alina said.

"Oh, Alina, why would that trouble me of all people?"

"It's not right to make liars of your friends. To compromise them, to put them at risk," Alina said. "I haven't had many friends but I know that."

"I don't have many friends either, true friends," Genya said. "But I think to have one, you have to trust them, not just protect them."

“All right. I want to have two keftas made,” she said.

“But you said it was a gift for the Darkling,” Genya replied. “Doesn’t he have enough black keftas? He won’t wear another color, I can tell you that.”

“One is for him,” Alina said.

“And the other?” Genya prompted.

“You know the answer to that. I don’t have to say it out loud.” Had she already said too much? The text had been very old, some of the words untranslatable with markings she couldn’t interpret. Even if it was not proscribed, was she introducing a fatal alteration? Genya, getting no response, shrugged.

“Corecloth? You’ll need a Fabrikator,” Genya said.

“Are you sure? I can’t think of anyone who would agree if they knew,” Alina said.

“David would spontaneously combust, that’s certain,” Genya said. “Perhaps, perhaps we could find you an otkazat’sya in Os Alta, there is a woman I’ve heard of who does the most marvelous embroidery, folk though she must be a durast.”

“An otkazat’sya would do it—for a Grisha? When it must remain unspoken of?” Alina said.

“Not for a Grisha. For Sankta Alina, I think all doors will open,” Genya said. “You want me to find her? The embroiderer? And the materials?”

“The Corecloth, yes. I can get the rest,” she said. She could. She would. She must.

“Still black?” Genya asked. Alina nodded.

“I hope this is worth it, Alinochka,” Genya said softly.

“It is. It will be,” Alina said. Was she making a promise or saying a prayer?

“Master Botkin, may I speak with you?” Alina asked, standing in the preferred combat stance, her feet set lightly on the floorboards of Botkin’s receiving chamber; his private quarters were just that but he allowed students to approach him off the training ground in the sparsely appointed room light by pricked tin lanterns and what was left of the sun.

“You may, Starkov,” he answered. She relaxed, but only slightly. He could have dismissed her and still might.

“I would like to ask your help in finding something,” she said.

“And why would you come to me?” he asked.

“Because you are Shu and what I seek is Shu mulberi silk.”

“I am the combat trainer for the Grisha. I was a mercenary before, not a trader,” he said.

“You are a countryman and I am a countrywoman, though I have never been to Shu-Han and cannot remember one song my mother sang to me,” Alina said. She had planned and planned, anticipating his feints, where there would be resistance. What she must say and what he would know from her face and the way she held her hands.

“The purpose you would put such an item towards is honorable?” he asked.

“It is necessary,” she replied, undecieved. Undeterred. She held his gaze until he looked away.

“The color of saffron,” he said. “One bolt.”

“Two,” she corrected.

“You fear spoilage,” he offered.

“No. That is how much will be required,” she said.

“You’re sure?” he asked. He wouldn’t make her explain. Botkin cared nothing for explanations, only for conviction.

“Yes.”

“Then I will make arrangements. By week’s end,” he said. There would be no further negotiations.

“I am grateful,” she said, expecting nothing more from him. “Master—”

“The lotus blossom, soft/ little lotus in the moonlight,/ sleep in the moonlight, my little lotus,” Botkin barely sang the words, only a hint of a melody remaining, his voice too gruff to be a tenor, too high to be a bass. “That was my mother’s favorite.”

“This is what you wanted, Sankta Alina?” the woman said, opening the kefta to display the interior. The needlework was even more exquisite than Alina had imagined possible and she was sure no Fabrikator could match it. The embroiderer of Os Alta was not Grisha but she was gifted, peerless, an master without a studio or an apprentice.

“It’s beyond anything I’d hoped for,” Alina said. “It’s perfect.”

“I followed the specifications exactly, but it is better with fittings,” the embroiderer said. “If you would try the smaller one on—”

“Thank you, no. I’m sure they will be all right,” Alina said. She reached out as if she would touch the nearly invisible thread that had quilted the golden silk with stylized silver-blue irises and the runes she had found in the text, but she knew enough not to lay one finger on the kefta. The one for Aleksander hung from the shoulders of a mannikin and such was the skill of the embroiderer that Alina could see how beautifully the midnight kefta would move

around his narrow hips as he walked through the palace halls, how it would seem he called forth the shadows to his person when he dismounted from his stallion in one fluid motion. “Would you wrap them for me? I brought a chest to carry them back to the Little Palace.”

“As it pleases you, Sankta Alina.”

“I’ll see you’re properly compensated,” Alina said. From another Grisha, that might have sounded like a threat, but Alina put enough of Keramzin in her tone to reassure the woman who was of an age with Ana Kuya but resembled her not at all.

“I already am,” the embroiderer said, taking out some clean linen to enfold the keftas, laying them within the chest Alina opened.

“He’ll know,” the embroiderer offered, as Alina handed her a small pouch heavy with coins. “He’ll know your heart after this.”

“I’m only worried about his soul,” Alina said. He had made the world drawing only from himself for so long; could he bear it, what she would give him?

“Then it is lucky he is loved by a saint, no?”

End Notes

Title is from John Donne "The Ecstasy"

I decided to do a little more world-building re: my marriage of the two keftas and She. What Botkin sings is not an actual Chinese lullaby but was inspired by one I found while googling.

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